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THE WEAKEST LINK IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING.

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DESPITE RENEWED INTEREST IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING, THE COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY UNDERGRADUATE PROGRAM IS THE WEAKEST LINK IN A CHAIN OF INSTRUCTION EXTENDING FROM THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL THROUGH THE POST-DOCTORAL LEVEL. IMPROVEMENT OF UNDERGRADUATE FOREIGN LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION IS IN PART CONTINGENT UPON A REAPPRAISAL BY THE GRADUATE SCHOOL OF ITS ROLE IN PREPARING COLLEGE TEACHERS. GRADUATE SCHOOLS MIGHT ADD TO THEIR PRESENT OFFERINGS (IN CULTURE AND LITERATURE) COURSES IN METHODS, LINGUISTIC ANALYSIS, AND ADVANCED FUNCTIONAL CONTROL, AND ALSO DEMAND A DEMONSTRATION OF FUNCTIONAL CONTROL IN THE FOUR SKILL AREAS AS A PREREQUISITE FOR ADMISSION TO THE GRADUATE PROGRAM AND FOR THE BEGINNING OF TEACHING. ON THE UNDERGRADUATE LEVEL, FUNCTIONAL SKILL COURSES ARE STILL NECESSARY DESPITE IMPROVEMENTS IN SECONDARY EDUCATION, AND MUST, IN ORDER TO ACHIEVE THEIR OBJECTIVES, PROVIDE CONTINUITY OF PROGRAM, MORE CONTACT HOURS OF INSTRUCTION, AND SMALLER CLASSES, AND BE STAFFED BY INSTRUCTORS WELL-VERSED IN THE METHODS AND GOALS OF AUDIOLINGUAL INSTRUCTION. THIS ARTICLE IS A REPRINT FROM "IMPROVING COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY TEACHING," SUMMER 1967. (AUTHOR/SS)

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The Weakest Link in Foreign Language Teaching

Emphasis in the following article is on the necessity of improving undergraduate teaching of foreign languages. The author (B.A., Davidson College; Ph.D., North Carolina) is chairman, Department of Foreign Languages, University of North Carolina at Charlotte.

By DAYMOND TURNER

EVER SINCE THE publication over a decade ago of William Riley Parker's *The National Interest and Foreign Languages*[1] the American public has become increasingly conscious of the value of second-language study as preparation for and ancillary to the study of a foreign literature, as a medium of communication with friend or foe, and as a vital part in the comprehension of a total, as opposed to solely literary, culture. This interest resulted in the inclusion of funds for the improvement of foreign language teaching in the National Defense Education Act of 1958. No person currently engaged in undergraduate, university-level foreign language teaching can fail to be aware of the tremendous improvement in secondary school language teaching, in both length and quality, since the passage of that Act. Foreign language teaching in secondary schools now puts emphasis on a trivium of objectives: (1) functional control of a means of communication in four aspects (auditory comprehension, oral production, reading, and writing), (2) comprehension of the culture of which the language in its functional and literary aspects is a part, and (3) an understanding and appreciation of the foreign literature in a more traditional sense. But as of this writing, the revolution in foreign language teaching has had almost no impact on what goes on inside the university or college classroom to which increasingly better prepared secondary school graduates are coming in increasingly disenchanted numbers.

Most undergraduate programs still suffer from: (1) confusion of objectives; (2) allocation of insufficient time for true mastery of the four skills; (3) a tendency to assign the teaching of basic skill courses to the least experienced members of the staff, often without adequate guidance or supervision; (4) disregard for, or lack of interest in, methodology best adapted to the various kinds of language learning; (5) a system which allows the beginning and intermediate courses to grow, like Topsy, one course at a time without any regard for articulation or the desired end result; (6) failure to schedule advanced courses specifically designed to maintain functional control and broader cultural understanding; (7) conduct of so-called "advanced" literature courses entirely in English, save for such reading in the target language as may be done outside of class.

Growing professional concern over these and other shortcomings has resulted in the publication of two important studies which embody recommendations for correction. The first to appear was "Foreign Languages in College and Universities" prepared by a working committee of the Northeast Conference on the Teaching of Foreign Languages chaired by Professor Roger L. Hadlich of Cornell University for the spring of 1964.[2] This was followed, in May of the same year, by the report of a conference sponsored by the Modern Language Association of America under the chairmanship of Professor Archibald T. MacAllister of Princeton University and titled "The Preparation of College Teachers of Modern Foreign Languages."[3] Writing some three years after these reports, John E. Dalbor, Pennsylvania State University, finds little evidence of acceptance of these recommendations at either undergraduate or graduate level.[4] Nor do I. In the present paper I should like to supplement certain of the recommendations made by these distinguished panels of conferees, while at the same time summarizing such of their findings as are particularly applicable to problems raised in my second paragraph above.

The Graduate Program

Although a considerable majority of the undergraduates currently enrolled in foreign language courses will not elect any course beyond the minimum required for a degree at their own institution, and although the total percentage of language majors who move directly into graduate work is still relatively small, the entire undergraduate foreign language curriculum for both major and nonmajor is skewed by the emphases of graduate programs, particularly those of the fifty-two departments in thirty-nine major universities which have for some time awarded a doctorate in a modern foreign language. Traditionally these have tended to minimize or ignore the maintenance and transmission of skill competence as one of the goals of language teaching and learning, have assumed that cultural understanding may be achieved from literature

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by a kind of osmosis, or can be fully mastered by spending a summer or a semester abroad prior to the final award of the degree. Stress has been on the development of "productive scholars" who are competent in literary research and criticism, or in historical, as opposed to descriptive, linguistics.

Despite distinguished exceptions, some of which have provided leadership for improvement of language instruction in elementary and secondary schools, the average member of a graduate faculty in foreign language is remarkably well insulated from the stresses and strains engendered by the threefold objectives of "language teaching in the new key." As the Hadlich committee observes:

> It seems ironic that the tension should so often be felt least by those senior professors of literature who feel themselves under no obligation to use the foreign language in their classes, and are, therefore, concerned only with the students' so-called reading ability. And these are the professors who make the final decisions concerning the nature of the college or university foreign language major program." (p. 43).

Improvement of undergraduate offerings, which the same committee calls "the weakest link in the secondary-undergraduate-graduate school chain," is therefore directly contingent upon a broadened base of graduate instruction.

Both reports stress the fact that mastery of skills and the two content areas (literature and culture) need not be tri-laterally exclusive, rather the first should be *prerequisite* for admission to the first course in either of the two content areas, while the latter may be taken concurrently. Also implicit is the recommendation that, even though content courses are conducted exclusively in the target language, courses should be made available at every level designed for the maintenance and improvement of skills.

The MacAllister committee made a considerable study of current practices at the thirty-nine institutions offering a Ph.D. in modern languages which were included in its survey. Acceptance of its recommendations, even by only the fifteen institutions represented on the panel, could have far reaching effect on undergraduate foreign language instruction throughout the United States. In addition to urging the establishment of national professional standards of competence for beginning foreign language teachers, the conferees recommend demonstrated proficiency in the four skills in the major foreign language be made prerequisite to admission to a graduate program in that language, and that control of skills, as measured by *nationally* standardized examinations,[4] be prerequisite to beginning of teaching. Literary criticism and research are still recognized as primary components of the graduate curriculum, but in addition it should include courses in (1) language teaching, (2) the principles of linguistic analysis, (3) the principles of cultural analysis, and for all save those demonstrating a proficiency of "Superior" upon entering the program, (4) language improvement. Recommended also is the establishment of NDEA Seminars for College Teachers, patterned after the highly successful NDEA Summer Language Institutes which have done much to upgrade elementary and secondary school foreign language teaching.

Undergraduate Language Program

Revision of graduate programs along the lines suggested above would ultimately lead to increased emphasis on functional competence in the undergraduate curricula, it might also facilitate the articulation of these with the secondary school programs into what should ideally be a continuum of learning stretching from the elementary school through the doctoral level. But for the present one serious obstacle to large scale improvement remains. Very few of the persons currently teaching modern foreign languages at the college or university level acquired their skill competence by audio-lingual methods adaptable to the North American college classroom, although many of them are quite proficient through circumstance of geography or birth.

Acceptance of the threefold objectives already referred to is a sine qua non. We foreign language teachers need greater recognition of the fact that for the non-major, who for the forseeable future will furnish the larger portion of our clientele, functional control is even more important than for the student who is planning to continue into the advanced content courses. We must recognize that cultural analysis can contribute to both the mastery of skills and the understanding of literature. And lastly we must remember that, in the words of R. P. Stockwell, ". . . Surely for literature to convey any other value whatever, it must first give pleasure. And to enjoy it, one has to handle the language with a measure of ease."[5]

The achievement of the threefold objective involves four very different types of teaching: first and prerequisite to the others what we may call "basic functional control"; second, what may be termed "maintenance and improvement of functional skills"; third, "cultural analysis of the area(s) where language is spoken"; and fourth, "literary analysis and criticism." A student may and should undertake the last three concurrently if he plans to major or minor in foreign language.

Quite different teacher preparation and techniques are needed for the successful conduct of instruction in the first two, or "skill" areas, from those adapted to successful instruction in the latter two, or "content" areas.

The improvement already noted in secondary school foreign language teaching will undoubtedly reduce the need for college level courses designed to provide basic functional control, and some college and university administrators are asserting that such courses really have no place in the college curriculum. Nevertheless, I feel that we will have such courses in the forseeable future for the following reasons: (1) even today not all high schools offer modern foreign languages; (2) colleges will continue to admit students whose mastery of basic foreign language skills is less than adequate despite two or more years of secondary school; (3) an increasing number of students for vocational or avocational reasons will wish to begin a second or third foreign language. In addition to serving the cultural and vocational values claimed for foreign languages, the basic skill courses at our larger institutions may continue to serve, as they now are doing, as demonstration and practice sections for the apprentice college teacher.

Courses to Insure Basic Functional Control

In view of the demands of other areas of the curriculum, it is probably unrealistic to expect the student who begins a foreign language in college to devote more than two years to a mastery of basic skills, even at those institutions which require three years of one foreign language for award of a degree. This means allotment of four semesters or six quarters to development of the four basic skills: comprehension, oral expression, reading, and writing in that order. A fault common to many of our present day lower division offerings is the intemperate haste with which members of a traditionally trained staff will strive to introduce reading and "content" materials to students totally unprepared to enjoy or profit by them.

For planning purposes the basic skill courses should be considered an integral unit, regardless of the number of semesters or quarters involved. The planning and over-all supervision of such courses should be entrusted to a senior staff member who is aware of the capabilities and limitations of audiolingual teaching and has a genuine interest in instruction at this level. If the number of sections involved is large, his own teaching load should be reduced proportionately. With rising enrollments and students who frequently change their field of interest and course program, we can no longer afford the luxury of allowing every staff member to choose his own text and to proceed at his own pace, particularly at this level.

Time. Both Committees stress what language teachers have long known, that even minimal control of the four skills requires far more instructional time than is available in the semester system sequence of courses meeting for three fifty-minute periods a week for two years.[6] Both recommend that skill level courses meet daily, and that sections be limited to a maximum of fifteen students each. We shall return to the question of class size shortly. The allocation of additional time, per se, will encounter opposition from some members of staff who fear additional teaching loads, from administrators who fear demands for additional staff, and from the members of other departments, particularly the laboratory sciences, who, firmly entrenched in their own five hour per week laboratory courses, are reluctant to see the members of any other discipline encroach upon student time. These obstacles are not insoluble at an institution where both the foreign language teaching staff and the administration are genuinely interested in turning out students with a functional control of the target language.

The efficient use of a large, properly designed language laboratory is one way of providing additional practice so essential to skill development. The jumbo language laboratory can fulfill a role analogous to the large lecture sections in such content courses as history or political science, and by assuming a large student load it can enable a language department to keep down the size of "live" class sections. The University of Delaware has had for several years a very successful beginning Spanish program in which the students meet three times a week in laboratory for drill and testing and meet twice a week with an instructor in small class sections. Many institutions do not award extra credit for laboratory drills on the basis that they are really part of a student's preparation, a sort of "homework."[7] This appears to be more acceptable to other departments than the award of extra credits for time spent in the language laboratory.

At this point, it is perhaps not amiss to point out some of the essential elements of an adequate language laboratory program: (1) staff acceptance of audiolingual goals and readiness to learn labo-

ratory techniques; (2) suitable materials; (3) close correlation between laboratory and class assignments; (4) obligatory attendance; (5) frequent testing in the laboratory, including testing of oral production.

Class size. The ceiling of fifteen which both groups of conferees urge as the maximum is predicated upon the assumption that skill mastery can be acquired only through active participation of the student. This is particularly true of the motor skills involved in speaking and writing. Assuming no participation whatsoever by the teacher, a member of a class of twenty-five would be able to speak for only two minutes during the fifty-minute hour of the conventional class meeting. This would mean ninety minutes per semester or three hours per year with the traditional three class meetings per week. And this in a skill which most authorities agree requires at least three ***hundred*** hours of controlled practice to achieve minimal competence.

The ability to hold beginning and intermediate classes within this recommended ceiling is of course related to the total amount of time involved and the availability of competent staff. As pointed out above, a large language laboratory, properly employed, offers a partial solution to this problem. The employment of upper-classmen and first year graduate students as teaching *assistants* (not teachers) can also release more experienced personnel to man smaller sections. It should also be noted that smallness of class size is not as critical in the content areas of upper division courses and that it may be possible to maintain small skill sections by increasing the size of the traditionally underpopulated content courses, which may be offered in alternate years or, as is now done at some institutions, in a three year cycle. This can be made more attractive to instructors concerned by assignment of readers to assist in grading papers and tests which such courses require.

Staff. As MacAllister's Committee points out very different skills and techniques are involved in teaching functional control of a modern foreign language and in teaching its literature. Furthermore, the Committee is unanimous in recommending that the graduate program include a course in the methods and materials of teaching the former, is less able to agree on the desirability of a special methods course for the latter. Traditionally at our larger institutions these skill courses have been given by beginning graduate students without such training, and too often with no or very little supervision.

Personally, I hold no brief for the popular theory that every senior staff member should teach a beginning course. Often their own best interests and those of the freshmen as well are better served by their exemption from this chore. But ways should be found to identify and reward those senior staff members who are especially adept at imparting functional skills to beginners. Measurement of student progress in the target language by nationally standardized tests in the several skill areas might be one method of identifying the superior teacher. Certainly, as the MLA conferees suggest, the apprentice teacher should demonstrate his own competence in these areas before he is entrusted with his first class.

The beginning teacher before his apprenticeship begins should also have had a methods course of the sort mentioned. In most cases this means that he can not be a first year graduate student. However, such students (or, in smaller institutions, selected upperclassmen) can enhance their preparation for teaching and contribute to the over-all program, particularly in the area of testing. To be effective, audiolingual teaching requires far more frequent evaluation of student progress than was the custom in our more traditional courses. During the first year of study this should be conducted about once a week and, as pointed out above, in the language laboratory. The grading of student recordings is a far more time consuming chore than the correction of an equivalent number of papers. This is true even when the laboratory facility permits the student to record his answers only. The temptation is to reduce the number, the length, or both number and length of periodic evaluations with a corresponding sacrifice of instructional efficiency. Student assistants working under careful supervision can lighten the burden of testing while at the same time learning much about test construction and the type of error to which the beginning language student is most prone.

Continuity. As set forth above, the courses designed to impart basic functional control should be considered integral parts of a continuum, preferably under the guidance of a single individual. Design of course sequence and selection of materials should attempt to tread a middle ground between the rigor mortis that sets in with imposition, without regard to appropriateness, of text written by a senior member of the department who

has not taught the course himself for twenty years and the anarchy engendered by those restless young Turks who seek to avoid boredom by changing texts and course content every term. It would seem reasonable that any course of study adopted should be given the trial of use for at least four years, or one student generation. This need not preclude the conduct of an experimental section or sections in those departments large enough to make it feasible. But it should be borne in mind there is much waste motion in continual revisions of program which involve all students at a given level.

Content Courses

The recommendations of the Working Committee of the Northeast Conference are particularly pertinent to improvement of our upper division courses: First, we must *"require that all students demonstrate the ability to understand, speak, read, and write the language sufficiently well to permit their uninhibited participation in classes conducted entirely in the foreign language and devoted exclusively to content."* Secondly, such content courses whether devoted to literature, culture, or skill maintenance and improval must, in fact, be conducted in the target language as the foregoing would imply.[8]

I can not wholly accept the recommendation of the Working Committee that the first course above functional control level be a "master work," rather than the traditional survey course in literature. Such an offering might ideally constitute the first content course in literature. But the student who is majoring or minoring in the foreign language might well take cultural and language maintenance courses concurrently. The number of upper division course offerings in each of the three areas and their content should be determined by interests of the institution and available staff, together with the number of semester or quarter hours required for graduation with a major in the given field. The student should be able to choose, from the equivalent of a minimum of eighteen semester hours in literature, twelve in skill maintenance, and at least six in culture and civilization. (On some campuses it is already possible to satisfy a part of the cultural requirement by taking a course in another discipline conducted in the target language, as a course in French history, with lectures, readings, and assigned papers in that tongue.) If the survey of literature is given, it might be offered in the senior year as an aid to a synthesis of previous work.

Summary

Despite a renewed national interest in foreign language teaching and the improvements in secondary school foreign language teaching brought about by the National Defense Education Act of 1958, the college and university undergraduate program remains the weakest link in a chain of instruction extending from the elementary school through post-doctoral level.

Improvement of undergraduate foreign language instruction is contingent, at least in part, upon a reappraisal by the graduate school of its role in preparing college teachers. It has been suggested that courses in the methods of teaching modern foreign language at the college level, in linguistic analysis and development of improved functional control, be added to present graduate offerings in literary criticism, research, and analysis, and that demonstrated functional control of four skill areas be made prerequisite for admission to the graduate program and for the beginning of teaching.

On the undergraduate level a clear distinction in level must be made between those courses designed to impart basic functional control and those content courses aimed at developing a new knowledge and appreciation of literature, culture, and functional control on a more sophisticated level. Despite improvements in secondary education, the functional skill courses will remain a part of college and university curricular offerings for the forseeable future. To achieve their objectives such courses must provide a continuity of program, provide more contact hours of instruction in smaller classes, and be staffed by instructors who understand and accept the methods and goals of audio-lingual instruction.

The upper division program must demand adequate functional control of the target language by the student as a prerequisite for admission to any of its courses, and these should be conducted in that language.

Notes

[1] Washington, D. C., U. S. Government Printing Office, (Preliminary edition) April 1954, 3rd edition, 1957.

[2] *1964 Working Committee Reports. Foreign Language Teaching: Ideals and Practice.* Baltimore, Maryland: Northeast Conference on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, 1964. Contribution of Professor Hadlich's Committee, with subtitle cited appears on pp. 37-57 of the *Reports.*

[3] PMLA, LXIX (May 1964), pp. 1-5.

[4] See: "A Realistic Look at the Training of College Foreign Language Teachers." *The Modern Language Journal* LI (4) April 1967. pp. 209-214.

[5] The number of universities to *offer* such a degree is growing, although growth in number of Ph.D. recipients appears to lag behind the creation of new institutions of higher learning. See my article "New Graduate Programs in Modern Foreign Languages," *Journal of Higher Education* XXXVII (5) May 1966. pp. 241-245.

[6] MacAllister, op. cit. pp. 3-4.

[7] Cited by Hadlich (N. 2 above).

[8] See Helen N. Mayo: "Class, Laboratory and Credit Hours in Beginning Modern Languages," *The Modern Language Journal.* XLVII (1) January 1963. pp. 23-25.